Building Transnational Union Solidarity

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Labor and Work in a Global Economy

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April 17, 2014

To build a transnational union solidarity movement, there are obstacles that must be addressed. Coalition building across borders is possible in today’s global workforce. The differences between trade unions in the developed North and the Global South are significant. Neo-liberal globalization impacts both groups differently and thus, expands the rational cavity between the parties. There must be a common ground on which to build the foundation for a unique international solidarity movement. This essay will explore these issues and expound on the solutions that have generated positive results.

The key to any agreement is the discovery of a common ground. ”Conflict and differences are inevitable” (Search for Common Ground, 2014). There must be a “big picture” that motivates all parties to put their differences aside, and focus on this ultimate goal. This ultimate goal for trade unions would be universal labor standards. By concentrating on the welfare of all workers, a definite platform can be developed to bond the efforts of all parties involved. The number one priority of trade unions is also the International Labour Standards (2013) focus, stated as “Freedom of association, collective bargaining, and industrial relations”. This standard is the cement that a successful, multi-national solidarity movement can rally around. The inequalities that exist in wages, benefits, and working conditions in different regions of the world, can be nullified by an absolute concentration on this one standard. By incorporating all efforts towards the achievement of this one goal, transnational union solidarity is possible. Getting international unions to put aside their craft agendas, and partake in an initiative that may not produce immediate results for their specific sector will require a certain amount of “Je ne sais quoi”. After all, why would a union in a developed country be willing to help establish labor standards in a developing country?

In an agreement the goal is to achieve a win-win resolution for all parties involved. Examining the possible benefits of a developed trade union partnering with, and mentoring a nascent trade union is inspiring. When an established trade union teams with an emerging trade union in a foreign country, they immediately increase their membership and gain access into a new market. This collaboration can also have collateral effects on developed labor markets. One benefit of raising standards in developing countries is that it increases the wages in those countries which can discourage multi-national corporations from relocating to these countries, and possibly remaining in the developed countries. By reducing the wage inequalities, the profit margins that are the deciding factors behind many corporate relocation decisions, is not as substantial. Another added bonus for established trade unions is the international bargaining power associated with a union that has members in multiple markets. By organizing trade unions in several different countries, if sanctioned job actions are required to oppose unfair treatment of members, a global protest can be coordinated with far reaching effects. To have workers on different continents all participating in a coordinated job stoppage would have an alarming impact. The media coverage for an international labor movement of that magnitude would be overwhelming.

Many would think getting ordinary people involved in a grassroots labor movement is a thing of the past, but oh contraire. President Barack Obama has won two elections with impressive “ground games” as he labeled them. By mobilizing ordinary citizens, in their own neighborhoods, the President was able to create a ground swell of momentum that his campaign parlayed into decisive victories. A brilliant tactic of the President’s staff was to aggressively solicit $5 and under campaign contributors. Even though the smaller donations equaled nearly half a billion dollars in the 2012 election, it wasn’t the financial impact that these donors contributed that pushed the President over the top, it was the ownership effect. By contributing five dollars, participants were able to claim ownership of the campaign. With ownership, came increased dialogue. At the grocery stores, at the shopping malls, and at the work place. When the subject of politics was raised, these campaign owners were empowered to explain why they had invested into the campaign. The same approach is needed for the global solidarity labor movement. A genuine grassroots campaign must start from the communities that will benefit from this newfound power. The workers that have been marginalized and exploited have to rise up with an occupy mentality and take ownership of their economic future. Global solidarity must be discussed in all venues, in every region, regardless of the stage of development that country is in. Brecher, Costello, and Smith (2002) wrote “people can indeed exercise power over globalization, but only by means of a solidarity that crosses the boundaries of nations, identities, and narrow interest” (p. X).

In the recent global fight against capital flight by multi-national corporations, organized labor has begun to do just that, organizes, but on a global level. Since 2000, there has been a push for binding international labor agreements. Of these agreements, the Global Framework Agreement (GFA) has emerged as the standard in this category. The International Labor Organization (ILO) (2007) defined these agreements as “An international (or global) framework agreement (IFA) is an instrument negotiated between a multinational enterprise and a Global Union Federation (GUF) in order to establish an ongoing relationship between the parties and ensure that the company respects the same standards in all the countries where it operates”. One such agreement was entered between the private security industry and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). This agreement combined the formidable SEIU with a group of unions from around the world who were members of Union Network International. The target of these efforts were the large, highly successful, international security firm G4S. “That campaign was remarkably successful. In 2008, G4S signed onto a GFA, promising to respect national labor laws; to attempt to improve working conditions and create dispute resolution mechanisms; and to refrain from anti-union campaigning”(Seidman, 2014). This agreement not only benefited the workers in the U.S. and Europe, but it also improved the working conditions for security personnel in countries like Africa, which has displayed a history of anti-union violence and mistreatment.

An often overlooked area in the surge of globalization is the impact that it has had on migrant workers. One of the values that many of the free trade agreements proclaimed, would be that of migrant workers and their ability to access jobs in other countries. Unfortunately, many of the eager travelers have been exploited by employers who recruit these prospects from impoverished, rural areas and subject them to forced labor once they reach their destination country. Pittman (2013) reported “Destination and sending countries face different challenges with regard to the regulation of transnational labor recruitment labor, but both bear responsibility for the wellbeing of migrants” (p. 6). The abuse that is inflicted on migrant workers can be classified as human trafficking and slave labor. There are countries that are taking an active role in the eradication of these inhumane practice. The United States has taken several measures to address these issues. “Since the enactment of the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protections Act of 2002, several cases have been brought against transnational recruiters, the most recent of which resulted in $4.5 million dollars in damages being awarded to 350 Filipino teachers who were recruited to work in Louisiana” (Pittman, 2013, p. 6) Another international soft law is the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel. This code is industry specific and includes guidelines and monitoring applications. Pittman (2013) wrote “Like other soft laws, the Code is voluntary and lays out broad principals that seek to encourage national policies to protect the rights of migrant health workers and maximize the benefits of workforce migration to national health systems” (p. 11).

Of the many international agreements that have been entered around the world, the one that is most interesting is the regional agreement of America. The North American Free trade Agreement (NAFTA) was heralded as the quintessential trade agreement of its time. NAFTA was supposed to balance the economies of Canada, Mexico, and the United States and improve the economies of all three by removing regulations and supporting free trade. As stated by Sergie (2014) “The central thrust of the agreement is to eliminate most tariffs on products traded among the United States, Mexico, and Canada”. The direct effect NAFTA has had on the American job market is difficult to gauge, however some results are realities. Sergie (2014) reported “that NAFTA forced "workers into more direct competition with each other, while assuring them fewer rights and protections”. Mexico has not fared as well under the agreement. Per capita income has lagged behind other Latin American nations. The Mexican agriculture industry has suffered the most under NAFTA. “Some critics single out Mexico's farm industry, saying NAFTA has crippled Mexican farming prospects by opening competition to the heavily subsidized U.S. farm industry” (Sergie, 2014). Canada has profited the most from the agreement. “Canada is the leading exporter of goods to the United States, U.S. and Mexican investments in Canada have tripled, and Canada has added 4.7 million new jobs since 1993” (Sergie, 2014).

In conclusion, the building of transnational union solidarity is well on its way. Global Framework Agreements are the leading instrument in implementing these achievements. Trade unions must continue to concentrate on international organizing with the focus being on improving labor standards throughout the world. Workers must come to the realization that the global economy requires a unified global workforce that is centered on a harmonious society where everyone has access to wealth and opportunities. Governments must come to the realization that inequality is counterproductive and will weigh on the resources of the nations.

And finally, businesses must come to the realization that owner and shareholder equity cannot be the driving force behind decisions to increase revenue. Workers rights and the communities they operate within, must become determining factors for corporations and their global expansion efforts. Strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, economic sanctions, boycotts, and outsourcing are all tools used to impose one set of values over another. Ghillyer (2012) explained “The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (p. 6). This very simple premise is the foundation for ethical and humane treatment of all individuals. Until businesses, workers, and governments see the value of each other’s contributions to society, we are stuck in this malaise of everyman for himself, which inevitably leads to the proverbial “race-to-the-bottom” scenario that has become common place in our society. At what point do we return to a time when the sharing of prosperity was good for all?

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